

1-1999

Kosovo crisis on the internet

M. Jones

University of Wollongong, mjones@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme>

Recommended Citation

Jones, M., Kosovo crisis on the internet, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 6, 1999, 127-132.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss6/13>

Kosovo Crisis On The Internet

Morris Jones

University of Wollongong

At about six on the morning of Thursday, March 25 (Eastern Australian Time), the first traces of NATO's air campaign against Yugoslavia appeared in the international news. CNN, arguably better primed to cover war in real-time than anyone else, dropped any pretensions of digesting its material before it was presented and gave viewers a video scrapbook of raw commentary from its correspondents around the world. Cross to Brent Sadler on location in Kosovo, who narrated the rumblings of what were believed to be impacting bombs, then jump in an instant to NATO headquarters and the White House, where nothing was being said. It wasn't really journalism as it is supposed to be presented, but the formula of correspondents under fire calling unfiltered reports along crackly telephone lines was a winner. In time, CNN would invoke all of the presentational styles it used during the Gulf War, to the extent that some isolated segments of footage or narration were almost indistinguishable from it.

We've been through the experience of a real-time war before, and we have all had time to review the experiences of January 1991. However, we now have another avenue of delivery. The Internet was alive and well during the Gulf War, but this time, it's a part of everyone's lives. Decentralised, democratic and almost real-time, the Internet should theoretically be the ideal tool for delving into an event such as the Kosovo crisis. The Net served well as a delivery system during the eruption of the air assault, but the style of usage was as conventional as a television broadcast. News organisations and news consumers alike engaged in a traditional dance of production and supply. In Australia, the use of the Internet reflected poorly on the ability of Australian news suppliers to use its power, and also reflected a lack of reach to events in a distant land.

Like it or not, the first serious traces of coverage of the war on the Internet must also be attributed to CNN. Using an engineering trick that was employed successfully to deal with the Kenneth Starr's infamous report, CNN dropped other news stories off its home page, leaving a short but easily downloaded page that would survive the expected barrage of hits from Net surfers. The rest of the day's news could still be retrieved, but users would need to click a link to a second page.

©AsiaPacific
MediaEducator
Issue No.6
January - June 1999

News on the Web is essentially a static, text-based mode of delivery, despite the increasing proliferation of multimedia clips. This format was adopted by CNN in breaking news of the bombings, but the mode of delivery was a rarely-seen example of what could be dubbed "real-time text". In a Web translation of the snippets being returned by CNN's correspondents, CNN's Web site featured a series of one-sentence points reported in a bullet format. Each snippet merely reported an issue such as "Correspondent X in location Y heard noises". Barely half an hour after this material appeared, these bullet points were fleshed out with additional content as more material was returned. Topping its coverage was a crude video still of a flash on a darkened horizon, a green halo from a night-vision system. Kosovo? Baghdad? In the past, CNN's Web page has had no hesitation in presenting icons, flags or maps when imagery was hard to obtain, but in this case, the immediacy of the footage took precedence over the fact that its information content was practically nil.

Other overseas news sites quickly followed suit, presenting conventional text news reports that had the benefit of official statements from NATO. Australia, however, dragged its heels in presenting a major event online. ABC News soon updated its own online news service with reports of the initial bombings, but other portals were slow to react.

Newspapers are conditioned to a less than real-time reporting format, principally because of their publishing schedules. Through accident or design, this practice translated onto their Web sites. Delays of at least two hours were noted by this author for News Limited and other print-related Web sites in Australia. When material came through, it was merely a raw or slightly modified feed from international press agencies. Even NineMSN, ostensibly tied to a broadcast organisation, failed to react.

Much has been said about the magic of so-called "portal" sites to offer every sort of information one could want on a single site. In Australia, portals failed to deliver the news in a format that one would expect from a high-budget site. Yahoo Australia and New Zealand was as slow in its reaction as the newspapers. Other sites responded similarly. In short, it appears that no online site in Australia reacted to the event in anything approaching rapidity.

One shouldn't place too much blame on the Internet in general, or even the online divisions of these news organisations, for the lag. The principal cause of Australia's slow reaction to the Kosovo crisis is our lack of correspondents in overseas locations. Foreign news in the Australian media mostly trickles through in feeds from international news agencies, or in reprints of articles from foreign publications. Foreign correspondents will venture

forth for short-term assignments that aren't geared to breaking news. Writers who report for local newspapers are mostly based in areas removed from Yugoslavia and its environs. None of this infrastructure is geared for handling an event like Kosovo in a truly immediate sense.

A comparison can be made with the way the Australian online media reacted on April 14, when the verdict in the Anwar Ibrahim trial was announced. The ABC Web site and NineMSN both featured coverage of the event in roughly 90 minutes of the announcement of the verdict. This rapid response probably appeared because news feed suppliers could anticipate the event and position reporters to collect it. All the local media had to do was rip the story and repost. However, Australia's newspaper-focused Web sites were still too slow to react. The Kosovo crisis and the Anwar verdict suggest that not all of the Australian media are asleep at their servers: rather, the problem for those who wished to react instantaneously was collecting information, instead of an inability to disseminate it. Newspapers, however, are still locked in non-instantaneous cycle.

By Friday, March 26, media both online and conventional had managed to produce fairly good coverage of the previous day's events in the former Yugoslavia. No newspaper or online site could fail to make Kosovo the lead story, but updating what was obviously an ongoing event would be difficult, even for the international media. The author channel surfed his satellite feed that morning, watching as the international media was expelled from the region. CNN, legendary for reporting from both sides during the Gulf War, found themselves with no airtime to fill and little to say! At the outbreak of the bombings, reportage had been constrained by time. Now, the principal constraint was space. CNN was once again forced to resort to the collage model, stringing together the testimony of Albanian refugees with the sight of fighters taking off from Italy. Perhaps cautious after the Tailwind scandal that saw CNN severely chastised for inaccurate reporting on the US military in 1998, CNN's anchorpeople added footnotes to the end of every piece to camera, stating that none of the alleged horrors could be independently verified at the time. This style would gradually filter through to all of the broadcast media. Ironically, while the battle raged, CNN quietly dismissed Peter Arnett from its ranks. The reporter who had become an icon of history during the Gulf War had paid the price for his role in the Tailwind scandal, and would play no part in this war.

With a shortage of evidence, CNN, BBC World and other news organisations retreated to a numbing cycle of interviews with retired generals and political scientists, all trying to speculate in the absence of facts. Gradually, reporters seeped back into

Yugoslavia, often escorted by authorities to predictable sites such as damaged civilian buildings. Reports from within NATO territories became a mesmerising series of bomb camera footage and sobbing refugees. Coverage from one day to another was virtually indistinguishable. Text-based reporting, both in print and on media Web sites, became just as tedious. The overall style of reporting in the first month of the Kosovo crisis was surprisingly mechanical. Coverage consisted of tallies of attack bulletins, damage reports, refugee numbers and vox pops of atrocity narrations. Little discussion of the origins of the conflict, the history of the region or the implications of NATO's actions appeared. One could easily explain this as being the only way that a continuous event can be mapped into a "daily" format of reportage, but the local and international media certainly failed to enrich this significant event.

Situations like this are, in theory, a stage call for the Internet as a destroyer of information barriers. The world has had no shortage of major events and crises since Netscape became a household word, but little evidence of this potential has really emerged. Media commentators could expect little change with Kosovo. CNN itself hosts interactive forums on its Web site, yet most of the participants were Americans who were concerned about the safety of their own troops. On Thursday, the first (and in the initial stages of the conflict, the only) message reaching this forums that allegedly emerged from within Yugoslavia appeared. Writing in capitals, a user called Danka K. from Belgrade claimed to be sending the message for the second time, accusing CNN of removing the first copy. The message was little more than a diatribe against America for bombing the region, and contained no information that advanced the cause of understanding these events. Danka K. suggested that a NATO jet had been shot down: whether this was heresay, deliberate propaganda or the first reference to the downed F-117 Stealth fighter was unclear. "I have real problems to post this (sic), plus I'm risking my life", continued the posting. "My friends told me that they were having the same problems. Even Internet is against the Serbs." The posting then signed off with a claim that it had just been discovered that four NATO aircraft had been shot down: again, there was no way to verify the statement, or the intention of the poster.

It's difficult to know if CNN did remove the original posting, assuming the user in Belgrade carried out the procedure successfully. CNN normally tries to screen material it presents very carefully, but it could also distance itself from any claim made on its message boards. Whatever the case, little information of any value seemed to emerge in near real time across the Internet across alternative news channels.

Yahoo's chat boards, run in collaboration with *Time* magazine, carried little more than parochial comments from Americans who wondered if their relatives would see military action, and quotes of activities garnered from watching American television!

Even the online news sometimes failed to keep pace. A day after NATO attacked, even Yahoo Australia and New Zealand had not yet created a specific subdivision for the crisis in their news headlines section! Ozemail's home page, which features a few token links to interesting Web sites (including current news stories), made no mention of the bombings at the same time.

As the Kosovo crisis reached the end of its first week, news organisations seemed to redefine the event from an instantaneous event of importance to an ongoing saga, still worthy of coverage but not of desperate immediacy. Facts were now emerging more slowly than even the print media could react to them: under such circumstances, the Internet has no real advantage to offer in terms of immediacy. It was time to focus on its other attributes. Usenet newsgroups, which offer the ability for long-term coverage of issues in depth, were an obvious forum for interested parties to congregate. Obviously, the Internet was spattered with messages relating to the crisis, but Australia's local newsgroups produced nothing of any substance. This author has noted in the previous issue of *Asia-Pacific Media Educator* (APME) that *aus.politics*, ostensibly an open forum for political discussions in this country, more closely resembles a closed circle of seasoned debaters. Understandably, this newsgroup experienced little disruption from these events, and the material that did appear was often banal! Insults that wouldn't appear in a family publication were thrown about in a short-lived thread. Similar trends were noted on *aus.general*, Australia's general discussion forum.

It's worth analysing the way that Usenet reacts to a breaking event. My last commentary in APME (Issue No.5) noted a roughly three week interval between the announcement of the last Federal election and an explosion of traffic on Australian newsgroups. It could be argued that an event such as this is better discussed in international forums, but overall, the level of reaction to events in Kosovo was always very low in *aus.general* and *aus.politics*. Nevertheless, some patterns did appear. The time delays observed in both the Federal election and the Kosovo crisis lend weight to the theory that online discussions on current events seem to draw much of their fuel from reportage in the conventional media. Without substantial talk offline, there is nothing to talk about online. Coverage of events in Kosovo was dramatic, but scant on detail for the first days of the conflict.

Hence, discussion on Usenet remained slightly above the

nil mark for roughly ten days. By April 5, the newsgroups finally caught up, reacting to a string of events such as the protest outside the US consulate in Sydney. Traffic remained relatively high (that is, posting levels of around a dozen messages per day) on the subject until April 12, then steadily trailed off. Weeks later, the subject was essentially off the groups. It could be suggested that the Net had burned through its supply of raw material for discussion in roughly a week. Once everyone had stated their position on the conflict, there was nothing more to say. The lack of any significant media coverage meant that discussions could not be sustained thereafter. Strangely enough, even the staging of the New South Wales State election in approximately the same period failed to stir the groups.

The groups were clearly responding to events reported in the media, but the general indifference of aus.politics to externally imposed agendas was also demonstrated by the fact that traffic levels were always low. Kosovo and Balkan affairs in general have never been popular topics among the Australian newsgroup brigade in the past. Why should things change because everyone else is talking about it? News values have been internalised within Usenet, and these values do not always match traditional ones.

Usenet may have been stagnant, but the Web was even more deficient in its reaction to the crisis. At a time when at least one Australian saw fit to post a personal account of his experiences during the vicious Sydney hailstorm in April on his home page, it seemed that no locals were prepared to state their case for Kosovo on the Web. Strangely, the only privately generated message aimed at a mass audience that the author witnessed was a sign on the wall of a terrace house in Sydney. The message simply read: "NATO MURDER".

One concession can be made to general discussions of the conflict on the Internet. For better or for worse, most coverage of the war in the media was unapologetically pro-NATO, from its point of origin to its tone. Discussions on the Internet seemed to be more balanced, pointing out some of the problems and failings of the alliance in its handling of the crisis. The reaction of the Internet to the Kosovo crisis is as predictable as it is explainable. Content and discussion may circulate rapidly, but generating serious information and thought must still be done the old way, using human effort. The latter is no easier today than at any previous stage in the history of journalism. ■

MORRIS JONES is completing his PhD thesis on the Internet as a delivery system for journalism at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Occasionally, he conducts public lectures on space science at University of New South Wales. Email: morrisjones@hotmail.com